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**U.S. PATENT APPLICATION
FOR
SYSTEM, METHOD AND COMPUTER
PROGRAM PRODUCT FOR REGISTERING
AN UNREGISTERED VENDOR/PRODUCT IN
A BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS NETWORK-
BASED FRAMEWORK**

ASSIGNEE: BUYLINK CORPORATION

KEVIN J. ZILKA
PATENT AGENT
P.O. Box 721030
SAN JOSE, CA 95172

SYSTEM, METHOD AND COMPUTER PROGRAM PRODUCT
FOR REGISTERING AN UNREGISTERED VENDOR/PRODUCT IN A
BUSINESS-TO-BUSINESS NETWORK-BASED FRAMEWORK

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present application is a continuation-in-part of an application filed August 15, 2000 under serial number 09/639,388, which is incorporated herein by reference in its entirety.

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FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to e-commerce, and more particularly to business-to-business frameworks implemented utilizing the Internet.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The Internet has provided a relatively new medium on which many business-related services can now be offered. In the past, many businesses relied upon mobile storage devices, i.e. compact discs, floppy discs, etc., for disseminating information for various purposes. With the inception of wide use of the Internet, information may not only be disseminated in real-time, but also updated instantly. This environment has allowed many business-to-business related services to be offered on a grand scale.

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Figure 1 illustrates a framework 100 associated with one business-to-business model which is used to provide a public forum for merchants 102, or retailers, attempting to locate vendors 104, or manufacturers, for the purpose of placing and fulfilling orders. In use, the merchants 102 may browse various product

lines **106** of products **108** offered by the vendors **104**. To facilitate such searching, the product lines **106** of products **108** may be organized into categories **110** and sub-categories **112**. For example, a vendor **104** may have a woodworking product line **106** including a Christmas nutcracker product **108** which may be found by searching
5 under a houseware category **110** and an ornament sub-category **112**.

Upon finding the desired product **108**, inquiries and purchase orders **114** may be submitted from the merchants **102** to the vendors **104** for the purpose of reselling to customers. In exchange for the above services provided by the foregoingu
10 business-to-business framework **100**, a fee is charged to the vendors **104** based on the value of the purchases. Such fee often comes in the form of a percentage of the fulfilled purchase order.

One problem that arises in the context of the framework **100** is due to the fact
15 that the merchants **102** cannot always find a desired vendor **104** or product **108** when using the system. This is a result of the vendor **104** not registering with the framework **100**, or a registered vendor **104** not properly registering a particular product **108**. Often, this lack of registration is caused by the fee requirement associated with the use of the framework **100**.

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There is therefore a need for a computer implemented business method for registering unregistered vendors and/or products in a network-based business- to-business framework.

DISCLOSURE OF THE INVENTION

A system, method and computer program product are provided for
5 registering an unregistered vendor in a network-based framework. Initially, at least
one order is received from a first user utilizing a network. Such order is directed to a
second user that is not registered with the network-based framework. Thereafter,
contact information of the second user is retrieved. A request is then transmitted to
the second user using the contact information. Such request is for the second user to
10 register with the network-based framework.

In one embodiment of the present invention, the first user may be a merchant
and the second user may be a vendor. Further, the network may be the Internet. As
an option, the first user may be allowed to complete a blank purchase order. Such
15 purchase order may thus include the contact information used to send the request.

In another embodiment, a notification relating to the order may be sent. In
particular, the notification may be sent if the second user fails to register.
Optionally, the second user may be charged a fee based on the order. Further, the
20 first user may be paid a rebate based on the order.

In another aspect of the present invention, a technique may be provided for
registering unregistered goods or services in a network-based framework. Initially,
at least one order for goods or services may be received from a first user utilizing a
25 network. In the present embodiment, the goods or services are ordered from a
second user, and are not registered with the network-based framework.

Thereafter, the second user is notified of the order utilizing the network.
Further, the second user is permitted to display information on the goods or

services using the network-based framework in response to the notification.

As an option, other users may be allowed to access information relating to the second user via the network. Such information is provided by the second user
5 during the course of use of the various embodiments of the present invention, and may include contact information and/or information relating to goods or services offered by the second user.

In another embodiment of the present invention, the registration may
10 include storing information relating to the second user in a database of the network-based framework. In use, such information in the database may be synchronized with information on a computing device which is connected to the database via the Internet.

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BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

5 Figure 1 illustrates a framework associated with one business -to-business model which is used to provide a public forum for merchants attempting to locate vendors for the purpose of placing and fulfilling orders;

10 Figure 2 illustrates a method for providing a rebate in a business-to-business network-based framework in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

15 Figure 3 shows a representative hardware environment in which the foregoing method of Figure 2 may be carried out;

20 Figure 4 is a detailed flow diagram showing the various features of one embodiment of the present invention;

25 Figure 5 shows an exemplary graphical user interface for displaying a current rebate rate, a current rebate amount, and the required money to be spent before receiving an incremental increase in the rebate rate based on a graduated scale, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

30 Figure 6 illustrates an exemplary graphical user interface that conveys information regarding the status of purchase orders and rebates ;

35 Figure 7 illustrates an exemplary graphical user interface explaining the various aspects of the rebate feature of the present invention;

Figure 8 illustrates a method for allowing a merchant to purchase goods and/or services from a vendor who is not registered in the database of the present invention;

5 Figure 9 illustrates a method for registering unregistered goods or services in a network-based framework in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention; and

10 Figure 10 illustrates a system and method for catalog display and maintenance.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

Figure 2 illustrates a method 200 for providing a rebate in a business-to-business network-based framework in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. As an option, the present invention may be implemented for a business-to-customer framework, or any other business model. Further, the rebate may take any form including, but not limited to a cash rebate. It should be noted that other value items such as coupons, discounts, or any other entities of value might also be provided.

Initially, in operation 202, at least one order is received from a first user utilizing a network. In one embodiment, the first user may take the form of a merchant, or retailer. It should be noted, however, that the first user may include any other type of desired party. Further, the order may be for any product or service desired. In various embodiments, the order may be received by way of an electronic message, an update on a website, or any other transmission mechanism over the network. The network may or may not include the Internet.

Thereafter, in operation 204, the at least one order is transmitted to a second user utilizing the network. In one embodiment, the second user may take the form of a vendor, or manufacturer. It should be noted, however, that the second user may include any other type of desired party. The order may be transmitted by any means similar to that by which the order was received.

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As indicated in operation 206, the second user is further charged a first predetermined amount based on the at least one order. Such first predetermined amount may take any form including, but not limited to a percentage, flat fee, graduate fee, or any other value that is calculated as a function of the order(s). The first user is then paid a second predetermined amount in the form of a rebate. Note

operation **208**. In order to ensure positive revenue, the second predetermined amount is less than the first predetermined amount.

- Figure **3** shows a representative hardware environment in which the
- 5 foregoing method **200** may be carried out. The hardware environment of Figure **3** may also be utilized by the first and second users in order to interface with the network-based framework. Such figure illustrates a typical hardware configuration of a workstation in accordance with a preferred embodiment having a central processing unit **310**, such as a microprocessor, and a number of other units
- 10 interconnected via a system bus **312**.

The workstation shown in Figure **3** includes a Random Access Memory (RAM) **314**, Read Only Memory (ROM) **316**, an I/O adapter **318** for connecting peripheral devices such as disk storage units **320** to the bus **312**, a user interface adapter **322** for connecting a keyboard **324**, a mouse **326**, a speaker **328**, a microphone **332**, and/or other user interface devices such as a touch screen (not shown) to the bus **312**, communication adapter **334** for connecting the workstation to a communication network **335** (e.g., a data processing network) and a display adapter **236** for connecting the bus **312** to a display device **338**.

20 The workstation may have resident thereon an operating system such as the Microsoft Windows NT or Windows/95 Operating System (OS), the IBM OS/2 operating system, the MAC OS, or UNIX operating system. It will be appreciated that a preferred embodiment may also be implemented on platforms and operating systems other than those mentioned. A preferred embodiment may be written using JAVA, C, and/or C++ language, or other programming languages, along with an object oriented programming methodology. Object oriented programming (OOP) has become increasingly used to develop complex applications.

Figure 4 is a detailed flow diagram showing the various features of one embodiment of the present invention. It should be noted that the network-based system of the present invention may take any form including, but not limited to a web-site, a P2P network, a distributed catalog content system, or any other system
5 that is capable of carrying out the functionality set forth herein at least in part.

As shown in Figure 4, a merchant, or retailer, may log in during operation 400. Initially, the merchant is assigned a base rebate rate in operation 402. Such rate may include a percentage of a total value, i.e. price, of a purchase order
10 submitted by the merchant. In the alternative, the rate may include any other fee structure that is based on the purchase order submitted by the merchant.

As an option, the rebate percentage rate may change based on an amount of purchase orders that are submitted by the merchant. In other words, the rebate
15 percentage rate may be selected based on a graduated scale governed by the value of a plurality of purchase orders. In the case where a merchant owns multiple stores, the rebate percentage rate may be based on the total value of purchase orders collectively made by the stores. In order to pay the above rebate percentage rates, the vendors may be charged another percentage rate that is greater than the rebate
20 percentage rate.

The rebate percentage rate paid to the merchants may also be increased if the merchant referred the vendor, or other retailers. This feature works to increase the pool of vendors and retailers. Conversely, any vendor that refers a retailer may be
25 excused from the commission for purchases received from that retailer. In such case, the retailer may not get the rebate for the referring vendor, but the rebate percentage rate may still be calculated based on purchases from that particular vendor, in accordance with the graduated scale.

A sliding window may also be utilized in calculating the rebate percentage rate. In other words, the rebate percentage rate may be selected based on the value of the orders taken within a predetermined amount of time. In one embodiment, such predetermined amount of time is 60 days for inducing merchants to place 5 orders timely. Equation 1 sets forth the formula associated with the rebate percentage rate, in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

Equation 1

10 $C_R = R[T \text{ in } [L]]\% + V \%, \text{ where:}$

R = the rebate as a percentage defined in the look up table
15 **L**.

L = the rebate-lookup table that defines the map between
the total purchase amount and rebate accrued (See
Table 2).

T = the total amount in purchase orders within the
sliding window, i.e. 60 days.

20 **V** = the discount generated for a vendor that has been
referred to by the merchant (applicable only for
purchase order for that vendor).

As the merchant utilizes the present invention to submit purchase orders for
various products from vendors, a current rebate rate and a total rebate amount are
25 calculated and made available for display. Note operations **404** and **406**,
respectively. As an option, the total rebate amount may be differentiated from a
total rebate approved to be cashed in operation **410**. While the total rebate amount
may be calculated based on purchase orders placed, the total rebate approved to be
cashed may be calculated based on approved purchase orders. Table 1 sets forth
30 various examples of statuses of approved purchase orders.

Table 1

	Submitted	Merchant has completed online purchase order and submitted the request to said vendor
5	Received	Purchase order has been viewed by vendor
	Accepted	Purchase order request has been accepted by vendor
10	Shipped	Purchase order has been completed and shipped to merchant by vendor.
	Closed	by vendor
15	Partially Shipped	Vendor has shipped part of the order to merchant

Table 1a sets forth various examples of unapproved purchase orders.

Table 1a

- 20
 - Any purchase order placed prior to a predetermined date;
 - Purchase order declined by vendor; and
 - Purchase order cancelled by merchant, vendor, or representative of the business-to-business framework.
- 25 In operation **408**, a value of purchase orders required to receive an increased percentage may be calculated based on the graduated scale, and subsequently displayed. This information may be conveyed utilizing any desired graphical user interface. Table 2 illustrates an exemplary graduated scale.

30 Table 2

Money Spent Percentage of Savings

5	\$0.00-999.00 = 3%
	\$1,000-2,499 = 4%
	\$2,500-4,999 = 5%
	\$5,000-9,999 = 6%
	\$10,000+ = 7%

Figure 5 shows one exemplary graphical user interface 500 for displaying a current rebate rate 501, a current rebate amount 502, and the required money to be spent 503 before receiving an incremental increase in the rebate rate based on a graduated scale (See Table 2), in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. As mentioned earlier, such values are calculated in real-time as the merchant purchases products using the searching capabilities 504, display frames 506, and descriptions 508 provided by the present embodiment.

15 With continuing reference to Figure 4, purchase orders and/or changes thereto may be received from the merchants in operation 420. Anytime changes are made to a purchase order, statistics in databases are refreshed to track a status of the purchase order using a “PO_STATUS” variable and any associated rebate using a “PO_REBATE_STATUS” variable.

20 When a purchase order is submitted by the merchant in operation 421, the PO_STATUS variable is assigned the with the status of “SUBMITTED”, and the PO_REBATE_STATUS variable is assigned with the status of “PENDING.” Note operations 422 and 424, respectively. If at any time the merchant cancels the purchase order in operation 426, the PO_STATUS variable and the PO_REBATE_STATUS variable are assigned with the status of “CANCELLED.” See operations 428 and 430. In one embodiment, the purchase order may be cancelled by the merchant only if the vendor has not received it.

30 Once the purchase order is received by the vendor in operation 432, the PO_STATUS variable is assigned with a “RECEIVED” status in operation 434. It

is then determined in decision **436** as to whether the purchase order request is accepted or declined by the vendor.

- If the purchase order is declined by the vendor in decision **436**, the
- 5 **PO_STATUS** variable is assigned with a “DECLINED” status in operation **438**. Thereafter, an electronic mail message is sent to the merchant for notification purposes. Note operation **440**. With the transmission of such message, the **PO_REBATE_STATUS** variable is assigned with the status of “DECLINED”, as indicated by operation **442**. It should be noted that a comment field may be reserved
10 for describing the nature of the declined statuses.

If, on the other hand, the purchase order is accepted by the vendor in decision **436**, the **PO_STATUS** variable is assigned with an “ACCEPTED” status in operation **444**. Thereafter, the vendor may ship the items in operation **446**, and the
15 **PO_STATUS** variable is assigned with a “SHIPPED” status. See operation **448**.

At this point, the vendor is charged a first predetermined amount, i.e. 9% for commission in operation **450**. The receipt of such commission is tracked in operation **452**. Upon receipt of such commission in operation **454**, the appropriate
20 rebate amount may be transmitted to the merchant in operation **456**. Ideally, the rebate is paid monthly, and only if it surpasses a predetermined amount (e.g. \$25.00). The payment of rebates is also tracked, as indicated in operation **458**.

Figure **6** illustrates a graphical user interface **600** that conveys information
25 regarding the status of purchase orders and rebates. As shown, displayed is a pending rebate **602** that is calculated in operation **406** of Figure **4**. As mentioned earlier, such pending rebate **602** is subject to approval based on the status of the associated purchase order(s).

Below the pending rebate **602** is an approved rebate **604** that is calculated in operation **410** of Figure 4. Further displayed is a cashed rebate **606** that represents approved rebates **604** that have been redeemed, i.e. checks cashed. A total rebate amount **608** is also calculated and displayed which represents the sum of the pending
5 rebate **602**, the approved rebate **604**, and the cashed rebate **606**.

With continuing reference to Figure 6, a status of the pending rebates **602** is tracked in a list **610**. Each pending rebate **602** is tracked by a purchase identifier **612**. As shown, the current status **614** of the PO_STATUS variable is displayed
10 next to each purchase identifier **612**. Also shown is the current status **616** of the PO_REBATE_STATUS variable. The associated rate **618** is also displayed along with the associated rebate amount **620**. Purchase order totals **622** are also shown.

Figure 7 illustrates an exemplary information page **700** explaining the
15 various aspects of the rebate feature of the present invention. Such information page **700** aids merchants and vendors in utilizing the business-to-business framework of the present invention.

Figure 8 illustrates a method **800** for allowing a merchant to purchase goods
20 and/or services from a vendor who is not registered in the database **422** of the present invention. This functionality allows the merchant to increase its volume-based rebate amount while attracting additional vendor users. As shown in Figure 8, the merchant information undergoes various operations **802** which correspond with operations **402-406** set forth during reference to Figure 4.
25

When a merchant attempts to purchase goods and/or services from a vendor who is not registered in the database **422**, he or she is provided with a blank purchase order in operation **804**. It is then determined whether the merchant has a catalog and information that are necessary for obtaining the goods and/or services

desired from the vendor. Note decision **806**. As an option, this decision may be decided by simply querying the vendor.

If it is determined in decision **806** that the vendor does not have the catalog
5 and information, the merchant may add the vendor to a list in the database **422**. See operation **805**. Using such list, the present invention is capable of transmitting a notification to the vendor. Such notification identifies goods and/or services desired by the merchant, thus giving the vendor an opportunity to respond with an offer to fulfill an order. Of course, the transmission of the notification may be accomplished
10 using any desired communication medium, i.e. utilizing email, fax, wireless delivery, satellite transmission, etc.

If, on the other hand, it is determined in decision **806** that the vendor does have the catalog and information, the merchant may complete the blank purchase
15 order. Thereafter, the completed purchase order may be submitted for inclusion in the database **422**. Note operation **808**. This may be accomplished using any desired communication medium, i.e. utilizing a network, etc.

Thus, if the merchant has the catalog information for the vendor who is not
20 yet registered, they may manually fill in the purchase order information including, but not limited to vendor contact information, product details, quantity requested, cost and/or terms. As will soon become apparent, such purchase order request may be eligible for the volume-based rebate should the vendor accept the terms of the purchase and register.

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Upon receipt of the completed purchase order, a copy of such purchase order is sent to both the merchant and the vendor, as indicated in operation **810**. Again, this may be accomplished using any desired communication medium. In addition to the merchant and the vendor, such copy of the completed purchase order is also sent
30 to a manager or person overseeing the database **422** in operation **812**. This enables

such person to contact the vendor for registration purposes via e-mail, fax, telephone, etc. Note operation **814**.

At decision **816**, the vendor has the ability to register with the database **422**.

- 5 If the vendor decides not to register, the merchant may add the vendor to the notification list in the database **422**. See operation **805**. If, however, the vendor decides to register in decision **816**, database **422** personnel may re-create the purchase order that was filled out by the merchant. See operation **818**. Registering may include receiving and storing contact and product information associated with
- 10 the vendor, or any other information necessary for allowing the vendor to use the framework. Once registered, the vendor may include its products in the searchable database **422**, and the various graphical user interfaces. Note Figure **5**.

- If the vendor accepts the recreated purchase order in operation **820**, the
- 15 merchant is given credit by updating the various parameters in the database **422** that affect the new rebate amount. Note operation **822** of Figure **8**. Further, the vendor may ship the product in operation **824**. As set forth earlier, the vendor is billed a first percentage in operation **826**.

- 20 Figure **9** illustrates a method for registering unregistered goods or services in a network-based framework in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention. It should be noted that a merchant may use merchant catalog information for identifying an unregistered product and/or service of a vendor who is already registered and present in the database **422**. In particular, the retailer may add to
25 their purchase order request such products that are not currently in the database **422**. This functionality further allows the merchant to increase its volume-based rebate amount.

- As shown in Figure **9**, a technique **900** is provided for registering
- 30 unregistered goods or services in a network-based framework. Initially, in operation

902, at least one order for goods or services may be received from a first user, i.e. merchant, utilizing a network. As set forth hereinabove, the goods or services are ordered from a second user, and are not registered with the network-based framework. By being unregistered, the goods or services are not available using the

5 framework 100.

- Thereafter, in operation 904, the second user is notified of the order utilizing the network. Further, the second user is permitted to display information on the goods or services using the network-based framework in response to the notification.
- 10 See operation 906. This may be accomplished by collecting information, i.e. pictures and/or specifications, on the goods or services for the purpose of displaying the same using the network-based framework 100. This allows other users to immediately access information relating to the second user via the network. Such information may include contact information and/or information relating to goods or
- 15 services offered by the second user.

- Figure 10 illustrates a system and method 1000 for catalog display and maintenance. As set forth hereinabove, the database may be created and maintained at least in part by participating vendors. This not only removes any potential for
- 20 data entry bottleneck, but it gives the vendors direct and immediate access and control over their own listings, 24 hours a day. As an option, various technologies may be employed to streamline this process even further, allowing direct automated synchronization between the database and whatever product database a vendor may already be using internally. To accomplish this, the information may be changed
- 25 into a predetermined format or the like using a common interface protocol.

- As shown in Figure 10, the dynamic distributed catalog management system 1000 may include a centralized content repository 1002 which includes contact and product information of various vendors. Interfacing with the centralized content
- 30 repository 1002 is a content synchronization manager 1001 which receives

information from any type of computing device, i.e. personal digital assistant **1004**, wireless device **1006**, personal computer **1008**, etc. Also included as a component of the dynamic distributed catalog management system **1000** is a distributed content aggregator **1010** which interfaces with the content synchronization manager **1001**

5 and computing devices for purposes that will be set forth hereinafter.

In use, the content synchronization manager **1001** allows vendors to manage their contact and product information without being connected to a network such as the Internet. This is accomplished by storing and maintaining the contact and

10 product information of each vendor in the centralized content repository **1002** and at least one of the computing devices. Maintenance may be carried out by synchronizing the contact and product information between the centralized content repository **1002** and the computing devices. This synchronization may be executed manually or automatically upon a connection being established between the

15 computing device(s) and the centralized content repository **1002** via a network such as the Internet.

Entire catalogs may thus be managed off-line on vendors' computing devices, at their own convenience, and without bandwidth limitations. The content

20 synchronization manager **1001** allows a vendor to "Instant sync" product information from the computing devices to the centralized content repository **1002** and vice-versa whenever the vendor is connected on-line.

As an option, software that affords the above functionality may be easy -to-

25 use, point-and-click, and freely downloadable, thus requiring no computer expertise for the vendor to use. It may also make it dramatically more efficient to upload large numbers of files complete with photographs directly into the centralized content repository **1002**. The system may also allow automatic importing of vendors' existing product data from MS EXCEL and many other standard database formats,

30 and provide easy field mapping.

Optionally, the present embodiment may provide content management and synchronization support for vendors with electronic data interchange (EDI) catalogs. A distributed content aggregator **1010** may be adapted to aggregate content from vendor's websites. This allows vendors to maintain their own sites and allow the present embodiment to serve as a collaborative hub without any restrictions on participating vendors.

While various embodiments have been described above, it should be understood that they have been presented by way of example only, and not limitation. Thus, the breadth and scope of a preferred embodiment should not be limited by any of the above-described exemplary embodiments, but should be defined only in accordance with the following claims and their equivalents.

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